A BOOK OF NARRATIVES

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PREFACE

THE editors of this book of narratives have one object in view — to lead the reader to see life closely and imaginatively. It is not especially planned as a guide for young writers who want to sell their first attempts to the omnivorous magazines; and we much doubt if any one will learn from it the temporary tricks for turning out "current fiction."

The aim of all great literature is to interpret life, and the special aim of fiction is to see life imaginatively. Emile Zola once said that all a novel can hope to be is a corner of nature seen through a temperament. To inculcate something of this supreme art of seeing life, by the methods of fiction, is the purpose of the present collection.

As we understand it, the purpose of writing courses in college, especially while drill in correct usage goes on, is to train the logical powers. We believe that there can be no better training in logic than that which exercises the faculties for close observation of life and for constructive imagination. Our commentary and notes are entirely devoted to defining and illustrating this exercise. We hope that the book will also be of help in the general study of fiction.

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A STORY?

1. *Plot*

A STORY is composed of the imagined or actual facts of life arranged in such a way as to make human conduct more intelligible and more entertaining than it is to the ordinary observer. A story is always more than a mere copy of reality. In life events follow one another; but except for this line of sequence they often remain formless. A narrative which merely follows the continuity of life does not necessarily have plot. A strictly chronological account of a day's excursion or picnic may well be such a narrative. As soon, however, as the stuff of experience is deliberately composed so that it *tells a story*, it forms a narrative with plot. Plot, then, is the formative and essential element of any real story.

Many students believe what they call the "invention" of a plot to be a supremely difficult task. It is, of course, difficult to be logical. But inventing a plot demands only a logical consideration of what one sees and hears in everyday existence. It demands, that is, a curiosity about cause and effect beyond what is superficially evident. To the mere observer life is but a spectacle. It is a moving picture for which no explanation has been provided. As soon as the observer begins to think logically about the show of life before him at any given moment he begins, consciously or not, to plot it. He cannot know,

of course, all of the past which controls the event he perceives, nor can he divine the actual future it will create. Yet he knows that the event has had a past and will have a future. He then calls upon his logical faculty, or, as some prefer to say, his imagination, to create facts as nearly as possible like the reality which his logical curiosity desires. In other words, with the help of his imagination he constructs a plot in which the spectacle that arrested his attention will appear as part of a piece of fiction.

This method of transforming part of the show of life into a story may be illustrated by assuming that the initial impulse toward the composition of Maupassant's story, *A Piece of String*, was observation of a specific event. If you saw a a shabby old peasant stoop to pick up something in the road and noticed that he was full of confusion at being detected, and then, if you thought nothing further about the incident, you would be regarding it merely as a spectacle. But if you had said to yourself, "I'll wager that old fellow has found a purse and that he doesn't want me to know it," you would have been at the beginning of a series of inferences which could lead to the plot of *A Piece of String*. You might proceed by asking yourself a number of questions. "What kind of fellow is the old peasant? What gave him that crafty and wary look? What was it he picked up, anyway? It might have been a worthless object, a pretty stone, or even a piece of string. Well, he would never be able to convince anyone who saw his furtive glance that he had not found something valuable. If I had lost a purse, I should *know* that he had found it. I should laugh at him if he asserted that the object he picked up was only a piece of string. Yet supposing he were innocent, would not such scorn as mine at his protestations of innocence worry the stupid old fellow literally almost to death?"

In reflecting in this fashion, you have simply given free rein to a natural curiosity. Yet in answering these questions

satisfactorily to your experience of life and accepting the suggestions as imaginative truth, you will find yourself equipped with all the necessary elements of a plot. Sustained and logical reflection upon any clearly marked incident is pretty sure to provide the mind with material which may readily be arranged to form a plot. The path from incident seen, heard, or read, to a plot is but one of the courses which lead the mind naturally to the construction of facts necessary to a piece of fiction.

2. *Problem*

Every story which is not the mere exhibition of a quaint character — that is, a character sketch — presents some problem. This does not mean that every story must teach a moral lesson or suggest desirable conduct. It means that every piece of fiction illustrates what the author believes to be some general truth about life. Indeed, the desire to present such a truth may be the initial impulse toward writing a story. Let us suppose that Maupassant from his reflective observation of life had arrived at the belief that many people suffer cruelly from unjust suspicion. The irony of his own futile efforts to explain away some unmerited accusation by the trivial and inadequate truth may have struck him. He determines, therefore, to write a story illustrating concretely this conclusion of his. Let us suppose, then, that he sets out to find just the chain of events which would bring out most sharply and most ironically the whole point. Those which he finally determines upon are perfectly suited to making the problem concrete without losing for it any of its vital significance. The object picked up is the least valuable in the world; consequently, no one will believe the man who asserts that it was this instead of a purse that he found. Maître Hauchecorne is exactly the sort of man to treasure such a trivial object, and he is just crafty enough to bring the suspicion of his fellows upon him. The power

of this story lies in the exquisite fitness of the plot in all its circumstances to the essential meaning of the fable.

The Necklace, another story of Maupassant's (appearing in Part II of this volume), can be regarded as illustrating this same method of finding a plot. Nearly everyone must have figured to himself the anguish and real financial hardship that might come from the loss of some valuable borrowed article. That is a problem that we have all faced imaginatively. You may have lost a valuable cuff-button, an heirloom borrowed from one of your friends. You worry greatly about the loss, but manage to have another made so much like the original that the owner never suspects the substitution. This suggests to your mind the common problem, but it is not pointed enough as an illustration to make the idea seem memorable. The events must affect more profoundly the lives of the actors in the drama. Accordingly the object chosen becomes a necklace so valuable as to require a large sum of money to replace it, and Mme. Loisel, the loser, is made a person in such straitened circumstances that enormous sacrifices and efforts are needed if she is to pay for a new necklace. These details in themselves deepen the *current* of the story. The discovery that the original necklace was paste and worth only a trifling sum does not change the nature of the problem; but by making the supreme efforts of Mme. Loisel entirely unnecessary, this invention gives the story a pessimistic irony which renders it a supremely vivid presentation of the problem.

In both of these examples it has been assumed that the author found a story to illustrate an idea which life had taught him. Yet whatever the author's initial impulse, his story will inevitably present a problem. Even when this impulse is the more usual one of an incident heard or actually beheld, the incident will fail to seem material for a story until it can be regarded as in some sense typical. Only then does it possess the meaning which relates it to the author's experience and

illumines that of his readers. In any case literary inspiration comes to those who through their steady observation of life see in it illustrations of the ideas which thoughtful living has given them. The problem of a story in this sense is its informing spirit, as the plot is its body.

3. *Character*

The plots of stories, we have found, are dead things unless manifestations of characteristic action of men and women. The problem is arresting only if it illustrates some recognizable situation of human nature. The part that character plays in any constructed story is thus obviously large. For events are interesting and convincing only when they are the natural expression of the characters who enact them.

Let us suppose that the plot of *A Piece of String* was brought to Maupassant's attention by hearing an anecdote related. The incident as it was told concerned a young man who had found some trivial object on the road, who had been suspected, by one who saw him, of having found a lost purse, and who had been unable to convince the police of his innocence. This might well strike the trained writer as material for fiction. Yet until he has chosen a character to play the central part, he will regard its possibilities as both vague and various. Any writer attempting to work this suggestion into story form will have to search his own experience for the most suitable character he can find there. The author of *Rhyolitic Perlite*, an American college student given this plot to make over, naturally thinks of one of the most peculiar of his professors — a crabbed and self-centered geologist. This man is made to pick up a stone valuable only to a curious scientist, and the story becomes a chapter in his life. Maupassant, for his part, on hearing the suppositious incident, at first may have conceived the story as being that of a young man whose career was ruined by the suspicion cast upon him. This young man may have been

imagined as robbed of the confidence of all his fellow townsmen, deserted by his sweetheart, and finally forced to leave the town in disgrace. However, as soon as the author determined that the object picked up should be a piece of string, he saw that an old man, a peasant rendered avaricious and crafty by his hard struggle with life, would be a better hero than the young man he had first selected. Maître Hauchecorne, once definitely conceived, brings with him, as it were, many of the details of the story. The setting is one in which he would inevitably move. The market at Goderville, the smells of the animals, the inn, and the countrymen crowded there are the environment which Maître Hauchecorne demanded if he were to live at all. As soon as a character is definitely conceived, its dominating power over the other elements of the story is a fact that must be early recognized by a young writer seeking to compose life as he knows it into a narrative. Henry James has confessed that his stories usually began with a character who assumed so vivid a reality that it fairly demanded vitalizing action for itself. His stories are thus the inevitable result of characters grown too strong to lie quiescent in the brain of their creator.

It is well to remember that a story is effective only if the characters are obviously fitted to enact the events of the plot and if they can bring with them a *milieu* full of the circumstance and detail of everyday life. Only then will they seem like real men and women.

An author's mastery over the characters in his story depends, of course, on the ability to draw from his thoughtful observation of men and women. He must have learned to see not only the picturesque idiosyncrasies which make them distinctive and individual, but also the hidden springs of action — the typical motives which make them recognizable like other men. Uriah Heep, in *David Copperfield*, by rubbing his hands, writhing like a snake, and protesting his humility, arrests our atten-

tion and suggests his nature, but he wins our comprehension by allowing us to know that, being a hypocrite, he is using his humility as a cloak to spread over his wicked schemes to get Mr. Wakefield into his sinister control and force a marriage with Agnes. The attempt to write fiction is a direct aid to the comprehension of life, because it immediately stimulates a closer observation of men and a more sustained and profound consideration of their actions.

Despite the necessity for the individual to draw almost entirely upon his own critical experience in dealing with the characters in his stories, a few practical suggestions about the arrangement of material drawn from life may be given. Certain facts about the important characters in every piece of fiction all readers wish to know.

First in importance, perhaps, are personal facts. The reader must know enough of a character's appearance, his mannerisms, and even his intellectual peculiarities to be able to visualize him or at least to distinguish him as an individual. In particular, the reader must apprehend clearly the traits of character which are largely to motivate the plot. Maupassant in both *A Coward* and *The Necklace* begins with the personal facts about the central characters and leads up to that trait which is to affect the plot vitally. In the remark of Viscount de Signoles, "If ever I fight a duel, I shall choose pistols. With that weapon I am sure of killing my man," we see all the bravado and social bluster which is to precipitate the tragic and ironical catastrophe. Yet neither in this case nor in that of Mme. Loisel does the author attempt an exhaustive characterization in the preliminary exposition. A judicious author will carry his reader as soon as possible into the actual story. He will allow the characters to reveal much of their nature in their introductory speeches and progressively in their action. The Viscount's conduct at Tortoni's tells really no more about his character than is given in the exposition,

yet without the preliminary description his action in provoking the duel would have seemed almost insanely precipitate. The Viscount's baseness is, of course, not completely revealed until the climax itself is reached. This is as it should be. Every story in which the relation between character and plot is properly vital will be a revelation of the nature of the principal figures. In general, then, if the salient personal facts of the characters be presented in the introductory exposition, the figures themselves can be trusted to reveal their inner natures while they play their parts in the actual story.

4. Setting

The setting of a story, as we have suggested, is largely determined by the important characters. Maître Hauchecorne inevitably brought with him the life of a small French village; Professor Lee in *Rhyolitic Perlite*, the life of a middle-western college town. Yet the choice of the actual picturesque details of the setting is a separate and independent act of artistic creation. Nothing in Maître Hauchecorne's nature forced the author's selection of the market day in Goderville. Yet the various scenes connected with the market stir all the natural environment of the old peasant into vivid and picturesque life. The scene in turn communicates its vitality to the characters.

Circus day in Perrytown doubtless seemed to the author of *Rhyolitic Perlite* the obvious American equivalent of market day in rural France. It offered, too, a similar opportunity for detecting the central character in his suspicious act and for giving it the necessary publicity. Besides, it presents the reader with a variety of details which are in themselves entertaining. But it does more. These details adventitious to the plot evoke much that is typical and recurrent in the life of a small town in the Middle West. The sense of amused recognition which the reader feels aids in making the story utterly real for him. These

inorganic picturesque details combine to make what is called *local color*. The proper use of local color is indicated from its position in the above story. It ought seldom to be an end in itself or to engage the author's attention until the characters and their story have assumed definite outline in his mind. Local color is interesting because it entertains the reader at the same moment when it is satisfying his sense of recognition.

5. *The Principle of Emphasis*

Everyone, then, who attempts to compose reality into narrative must consider as elements of his story, plot, problem, character, and setting. The question of the most effective arrangement of these elements of a story is largely one of obtaining proper emphasis. Plot, problem, character, and setting may enter the mind of an author in any order. When they have been combined, however, to such an extent that the author can see clearly the outline of his story, he must decide how to direct the reader's attention to those parts of his narrative which he considers most important. These are commonly the beginning of the action, the climax, and the dénouement.

Every story begins with a description of some fairly well established condition of affairs. Into this *status quo* comes some person or event that disturbs the stability and compels a readjustment of the relations between the characters. Such an event marks the beginning of the narrative action. The climax is the point at which the struggle between the forces of conservation and those of disintegration is most intense. It is the point toward which all the events in the story converge either in prophecy or in retrospect. The dénouement is that moment in the story at which the nature of the new *status quo* determined by the story is made clear. All of these points deserve a varying degree of emphasis.

The climax is obviously the crucial point in a narrative.

Of this the author must have a definite idea before he begins to write a word. Toward this summit the reader must be led from the very beginning of the story with quickening interest. It must receive, therefore, most emphatic attention. The problem, then, that confronts every author of any short story at the threshold of his tale is, "How can I introduce character, setting, and other preliminary circumstance to my reader without emphasizing them to such an extent that his sense of progress toward a climax will be destroyed?"

Trollope's method of solving this common problem in *Malachi's Cove* is simple, natural, and consecutive enough to be studied as a model. He begins with a description of the actual setting of the story — first of the wild, precipitous coast of Cornwall, and then of the fissure in the rock in which old Malachi lived and from which he eked his precarious living. Yet the mind does not rest in these details as an end in themselves. They give us a forward view by suggesting the nature of the characters to appear. We expect some one savage and elemental, and Mally does not disappoint us. In the somewhat extended description of her, Trollope is able to introduce further details of the setting, which would have been tiresome and confusing if given all at once at the beginning. Up to this point the author has been engaged in pure exposition. He has been describing the existing state of affairs which some external force is to provoke into the movement of a story. This exciting influence is Barty Gunliffe and his insistence upon gathering seaweed in Mally's Cove. In the changes which Barty's appearance will produce in the life of Mally we realize that our story will lie.

Laurella in *L'Arrabbiata* is almost exactly the same sort of character as Mally. Her story is introduced, however, in a different way. The various stages of the narrative are not so clearly indicated as those in *Malachi's Cove*. The landscape which Paul Heyse describes bears no intrinsic emo-